

Hoosier Folklore

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HOOSIER FOLKLORE

VOL. VII DECEMBER, 1948

NO. 4

MY GOLDEN BALL

By DAVID S. MCINTOSH

Slack up the rope, slack up the rope, and wait a lit-tle

while, I think I see my fa - ther a - com - ing, out

on that rov - ing wild. B Fa - ther have you found my

gold - en ball, and have you come to set me free, or

have you come to see me hung, all on this lin-den tree?

Mrs. Lessie Parrish of Carbondale, Illinois, recorded this ballad on November 15, 1945. She spent most of her life in Jackson County, Illinois. She was seventy-five years old when the recording was made.

Belden includes one version of this ballad under the title, "The Maid Freed from the Gallows."¹ The Missouri version is similar to the version from Mrs. Parrish in that it is a man who is freed from the gallows.

¹ H. M. Belden, *Ballads and Songs* (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Studies, Volume XV, 1940), pp. 66-67.

Barry, Eckstorm, and Smyth include a number of versions of the text but no versions of the tune. They include several "cante-fables," or stories that are associated with this ballad.²

Sharp gives eleven versions of the ballad, including the tunes with the texts. The tunes are all different from the Parrish tune.³

My Golden Ball

- A. 1. Slack up the rope, slack up the rope,
And wait a little while,
I think I see my father a-coming,
Out on that roving wild.
- B. 2. Father, have you found my golden ball,
And have you come to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung,
Out on this linden tree?
- B. 3. I've not found your golden ball,
And I've not come to set you free,
But I have come to see you hung,
Out on this linden tree.
- A. 4. Slack up the rope, slack up the rope,
And wait a little while,
I think I see my mother a-coming,
Out on this roving wild.
- B. 5. Mother, have you found my golden ball,
And have you come to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung,
All on this linden tree?

² Phillips Barry, Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, Mary Winslow Smyth, *British Ballads from Maine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), pp. 206-213.

³ Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 208-214.

- B. 6. I've not found your golden ball,
And I've not come to set you free,
But I have come to see you hung,
Out on this linden tree.
- A. 7. Slack up the rope, slack up the rope,
And wait a little while,
I think I see my brother a-coming,
Out on this roving wild.
- B. 8. Next Brother, have you found my golden ball,
And have you come to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung,
Out on this linden tree?
- B. 9. I've not found your golden ball,
And I've not come to set you free,
But I have come to see you hung,
Out on this linden tree.
- A. 10. Slack up the rope, slack up the rope,
And wait a little while,
I think I see my sister a-coming,
Out on this roving wild.
- B. 11. Sister, have you found my golden ball,
And have you come to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung,
Out on this linden tree?
- B. 12. I've not found your golden ball,
And I've not come to set you free,
But I have come to see you hung,
Out on this linden tree.
- A. 13. Slack up the rope, slack up the rope,
And wait a little while,
I think I see my true love coming,
Out on this roving wild.

B. 14. True love, have you found my golden ball,
And have you come to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung,
Out on this linden tree?

B. 15. I have found your golden ball,
And I have come to set you free,
But I've not come to see you hung,
Out on this linden tree.

"When I was just a kid and when I was in a rope swing out under the oak tree, I'd swing, swing, swing, and sing this song. I thought it was terrible the way it began, you know.

"Well, you see, a boy was given this ball to take care of and the king told him that if he lost it, he'd hang him, and the boy lost it and nobody found it. They had him out there ready to hang him up, and he'd beg every time when he'd see somebody else coming, to wait till they got there to see if they'd found the ball, and they all gave up but the sweetheart, and she didn't give up till she found it, and then she came with it and saved his life. That's what I thought was so wonderful, of course."

Southern Illinois University

Carbondale, Illinois

A MACEDONIAN WEDDING IN INDIANAPOLIS

By MARGARET MONTGOMERY

Just six miles north of the Greek border is the city of Bitolji, the birthplace of the father of one of my young Macedonian friends, Luba, who graduated from Shortridge High School last June and was married the following October. According to Macedonian custom the godparents of the groom and his family bear the expense of the wedding. Incidentally the choice of a godmother is determined by heredity, the honor being handed down from one generation to another. In case there is no daughter to inherit the title, the next nearest relative serves. Since both Luba's and Louis' parents are Macedonians, their wedding was an unusually elaborate affair.

I shall always be grateful for my opportunity to see such old world pageantry. As the wedding was a large one and their church small, the family paid fifty dollars to rent the North Methodist Church so that there would be room enough to accommodate all their guests. It must have cost as much or more to fly a Bulgarian priest from Detroit to officiate. About three o'clock on Sunday afternoon of October 10, the families began to arrive — short, stockily-built papas, buxom mamas, and handsome, dark-eyed children. Their curiosity over the church was as evident as mine always is in the Eastern Orthodox.

The pattern, at first, seemed like that of any large wedding. After the six bridesmaids, maid of honor, flower girl, and ring-bearer were lined up on one side of the church and seven young men on the other, the bride entered on the arm of her father. Dressed in white satin with a veil held by orange blossoms, she looked very attractive. Any girl might well have envied her large brown eyes, long dark eyelashes, and smooth, fair complexion. At three-thirty as the sun was casting oblique rays through the stained glass windows, the Bulgarian priest entered. Garbed in a magnificent white and gold robe, he came

to the chancel rail. He carried the large cross of the Eastern church, the symbol of which was also embroidered on the back of his robe. From here on any trace of Methodism vanished.

There was a prayer in Bulgarian, followed by a translation in very broken English. Two cantors from different places in the congregation assisted in the ritual. After the prayer the godmother popped up from her pew in the front, removed from a box a tall white taper tied with white satin ribbon, and presented it to the priest. The priest blessed the taper, and holding it first above the groom and then above the bride, blessed them. Although the words of the ritual even in the English translation were difficult to understand, there never was a dull moment. At appropriate intervals the godmother would hand the priest the necessary symbols from a table in front of the chancel. A long pink scarf was placed around the shoulders of groom and bride, thus joining them together. This scarf the bride keeps and later makes into a blouse or something personal for herself. Next the priest took two gold, gem-studded crowns, interchanged them, and held one, then the other, over Luba and Louis. Finally he placed the one on the groom and the other on the bride. These crowns, which were brought from the Detroit church, signify the king and queen of the household. Since the bride's orange blossoms caused her crown to totter, the godmother held it in place, whereupon the godfather marched from his pew and proceeded to hold the groom's, too. A communion cup was offered to the groom, the bride, the godmother, the godfather, the two cantors, and the best man, each of whom smacked his lips and showed audible approval. By this time the groom was beginning to perspire; so his godfather obligingly took his own pocket handkerchief and mopped Louis' face for him. A busy day for the godparents!

Following a double ring ceremony, the bride and groom walked around the table three times. It is a tradition that at this time the guests should throw candy, rice, and money; this, however, was omitted, because there was too little space at the front of the church. (I suppose that that is one reason why there are so few pews in the Rumanian and Bulgarian churches.) The priest then gave them his blessing and much

to the pleasure and amusement of the guests wished them many children. After the reception in the lobby and after the photographer had finished taking pictures, the wedding party went to their cars, which were decorated with streamers of brightly colored crepe paper — decorated for all the world like cars in a high school or college football parade.

From the church all the guests drove to the Municipal Gardens, a country club on White River and Sixteenth Street, at the edge of the Macedonian colony. When I arrived, an orchestra—drums and a horn—was playing merrily. I learned later that this orchestra came from Dayton, Ohio, especially to play for the wedding dance. The music was irresistible, a seven-part time and a two-part time being the favorites. A handsome young Macedonian who has come to this country only recently was the leader. As he began, another young man would join him, copying the steps. Soon a large circle was formed — old and young — men and women. Since all the dances were circles, there was no necessity to choose partners or to pair off. The very young children formed their own circle often within the larger one. Around the room sat some of the older folks, tho' they, too, joined before the evening was over.

As the evening progressed, the guests made frequent trips downstairs to get ham sandwiches and cokes, supplied, of course, by the groom's godparents and his family. Introduced as a teacher and friend of the bride, I was constantly being offered a sandwich and showered with attention. Teachers are somebody! About ten the bride started to cut her wedding cake, which reposed on a long table piled high with belated gifts. She apologized to me for the motley assortment of paper napkins, stating that the 1,000 napkins she had ordered had failed to arrive, and she had had difficulty in assembling a quantity at the last minute. It was then I realized how large this wedding party really was.

After the entire array of guests had been served, the music began for the bridal dance. The groom, holding aloft in his left hand a huge round loaf of bread, started the circle. The bride came next; then all the relatives including grandparents and very young children joined. This is strictly a family dance. As the dance progressed, the loaf was passed from one to

another. Since the loaf was heavy and the steps of the dance routine intricate, this seemed to me a work of art.

I think I was particularly impressed with the respect for family life that these circle dances foster. Three- and four-year-olds just able to toddle, grandmothers and grandfathers—all take part. As the tempo increases and the drums beat out an exciting rhythm, there is occasionally an accompaniment of shouting and stamping of feet, but never any loss of dignity or decorum. I left shortly after this family or bridal dance, but the rest of the party lingered till midnight, when they escorted the newlyweds to their home.

Shortridge High School

Indianapolis, Indiana

THE TUNE THE OLD COW DIED ON

By RUTH ANN MUSICK

The musical notation is written on four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics 'Farm-er John from his work came home One summer's after-' are written below the staff. The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics 'noon, And sat himself down by the ma-ple grove And'. The third staff features a key signature change to two sharps (F# and C#) and includes the lyrics 'sang himself this tune. Chorus: Ri fol de ol, di'. The fourth staff concludes the piece with the lyrics 'ri fol dal di Tune the old cow died on.' and ends with a double bar line.

Farm-er John from his work came home One summer's after-
noon, And sat himself down by the ma-ple grove And
sang himself this tune. Chorus: Ri fol de ol, di
ri fol dal di Tune the old cow died on.

All my life I have heard the expression "The tune the old cow died on," but I never dreamed it was an actual song. I thought it was probably a figurative expression, denoting something so slow and dull, that even a cow would be literally bored to death — by listening.

It is nothing of the sort. It is a real song with six stanzas, a refrain, and a lively tune. (You see, the cow didn't die of boredom — but by trying to sing this song.)

Last summer at Iowa City, Iowa, a friend of mine, Mrs. Louis Taber, brought in Miss Mary Morrissey, of Irish descent, thinking she might have some Irish folksongs for me. Miss Morrissey thought that possibly she and her sister might be able to reconstruct a number of songs of Irish origin, for recording purposes, if I could warn her ahead, which I had hoped to do this summer. She thought, among others, she could get "Little Joe" for me and "Jack Dalton," but so far, I don't have them. She did give me this delightful version of "The Tune The Old Cow Died On," which was my first knowledge that such a song existed. Here it is.

The Tune the Old Cow Died On

(As sung to me by Miss Mary Morrissey of Rochester, Iowa, who learned it from her mother, Mrs. Ella Tiernan Morrissey.)

1. Farmer John from his work came home
One summer's afternoon,
And sat himself down by the maple grove
And sang himself this tune.

Chorus.

Ri fol de ol, Di ri fol dal di
Tune the old cow died on.

2. The farmer's cows came running home
And round him formed a ring;
For they never heard good Farmer John
Before attempt to sing.
3. The oldest cow in the farmer's herd
Tried hard to join the song;
But she couldn't strike that melody—
Her voice was loud and strong.
4. The farmer laughed till the tears rolled down
His cheeks like apples red;
The cow got mad and tried to sing
Until she dropped down dead.
5. The farmer had an inquest held
To see what killed the cow.
The verdict of that jury was
What I mean to tell you now.
6. They said that the cow would be living yet
To chew her cud with glee
If good Farmer John hadn't sung that song
Beneath the maple tree.

LYING ABE: A TALE-TELLER AND HIS REPUTATION

By WILLIAM HUGH JANSEN

(Editor's note: There follows a part of a long study on Oregon Smith, an Indiana and Illinois story-teller who was variously known as Oregon, Lying Abe, Sassafras, Doctor, or—his actual name—Abraham Smith. Oregon's tales have appeared in Carl Carmer's *America Sings* (New York: Knopf, 1942), pp. 78-81; Herbert Halpert and Emma L. Robinson's "Oregon Smith, an Indiana Folk Hero," *SFQ* 6: 163-8; an article in *HFB* 3:73-4; and C. Lauron Hooper's *A Cloverdale Skeleton* (New York: John B. Alden, 1889), a novel in which Smith is a major character. The study from which comes this excerpt contains eighty-two different tales, legends, and whoppers—some with many variants—told by or about Abe Smith. This number may convey some idea of Smith's activity as a folk artist.

A brief chronology may clarify some of the following references. Born May 17, 1796, in Tennessee, Abraham Smith moved to Indiana in 1821. By 1823, he was in Illinois' Vermilion County. Probably in 1832 he moved into Edgar County, of the same state, and homesteaded on the site that is now the village of Chrisman and the seat of his descendants. During the 1850's, he was in Oregon. From 1860 to 1881, he lived in Bloomington, capitol of Monroe County, Indiana. From 1881 to 1893, when he died at the age of 97, he was in and about Chrisman, Illinois. The research upon which the section presented here is based was done in Bloomington and Chrisman and in the two counties where they are situated.

While in parentheses, the editor wishes to apologize to the Society for giving so much space to this particular author and promises not to offend in this direction too frequently.)

I didn't know any Abraham Smith around here.

Oh, *Oregon* Smith. Was Abraham his first name?

No, I never heard him tell stories, but every one knew

him for his stories. They used to say that he told the same stories so often that he believed them himself.¹

Such is the reaction to Abraham Smith, particularly outside that area in Illinois where the existence of his family assures the folk that he must have existed in a normal every day life. But where that bond with reality does not exist, Abraham survives only as Oregon Smith or Lying Abe. In the speaker's mind there is sometimes an uncomfortable sense that Oregon or Lying Abe must have been something besides the epitome of a tale-teller, and sometimes there is even doubt if Oregon was anything except a figment of the imagination.

In Abraham's home county in Illinois, the reaction is only a little different:

People would say, "Here comes Mr. Smith," or "There comes Uncle Abe"; that's what everyone called him, and it wasn't disrespectful at all.

And then someone would say, "Is that Lying Abe?"

"Yes," and then they'd all try to get him to tell a story.²

Thus Abe was the story-teller of the two regions in which he had his last thirty years of residence: Indiana's Monroe County and Illinois' Edgar County. In the latter area, his reputation thoroughly blanketed the county and reached over into neighboring counties. Whether this was true in Monroe County cannot be determined. Of course, Abraham's residence in Monroe was of briefer duration and twenty years further removed from the present than his last stay in Edgar County. Evidently, Abe's tale-telling reputation in Monroe County was very strong for a time; certainly it faded much more with the passing years than did that same reputation in Edgar and surrounding counties. Around Bloomington now one has to seek for one who knows Oregon Smith tales, whereas it is a rare adult in Chrisman who cannot tell at least one legend about Smith and one or two of Lying Abe's tales. It should not be denied, however, that even in Chrisman the whole com-

¹ Mr. Will I. Fee, Bloomington, Indiana.

² Mr. Willard E. Dorsett, Paris, Illinois.

plex of legend and tale is beginning to fade and probably will continue to lose color unless some more good tale-tellers come along to replace those who are growing old or who have died—for though everyone may know tales, a community is fortunate to have one or two tale-tellers in each generation. This rarity of tale-tellers is not a peculiarity of on-rushing civilization: those with this talent have always been rare; otherwise the Abe Smiths of the Mid West and the John Darlings of the East would never have built up regional reputations that survived them for fifty and more years.

Twenty-five, thirty years ago everyone talked about Lying Abe. Everytime anyone told a big yarn, somebody'd remember Lying Abe, and then they'd tell one of his big stories. I remember about his sassafras medicine—and about his trouble with Elijah Bacon [which happened more than a century ago, perhaps fifty years before the informant was born!]. But he always talked about his medicine. When he was around, Father and Monroe Smith would fix it up so he'd tell his medicine stories. Why, more jokes have been told about Abe Smith than I could remember in ten years.³

Old Abraham Smith was noted for his tales. You can't imagine really how noted he was. There was an old gentleman who lived next here with his brother. He'd been out to the Gold Rush and had stayed up and down the West Coast twenty-five years. He had heard about Abe and his stories even out on the West Coast.⁴

These two reports were collected in towns thirteen miles apart, the first from the center of Edgar County, the second from the very center of what might be called the Abe Smith country. Naturally this latter center, Chrisman, abounds in testimony to the strength of Abe's reputation as a tale-teller.

Lying Abe was the nickname he was known around here as. Everyone knew Lying Abe, or about him. I can't remember any conscious association with Honest Abe, but

³ Mr. Dorsett.

⁴ Mr. Otis Matheny, Chrisman, Illinois.

the nickname was an old one. At the beginning, there may have been some connection with Honest Abe [Lincoln].⁵

That the reputation was of long duration is proved by the fact that one of his tales was printed with the proper credit and another cited in 1879 in an account written nearly thirty years after he had left the neighborhood by an editor who had no idea Abraham was alive and who referred with humorous admiration to "Abraham Smith's penchant for big yarns."⁶

Frequently, of course, there is a tinge of moral judgment in calling a person a tale-teller, and this is evident in the reputation of Oregon, Lying Abe, Smith. A grown man, particularly a good, church-going pioneer who had a degree of success in several ventures, should not tell worthless stories of no practical value. This judgment will appear in several interviews cited in this chapter to illustrate other points. It is implicit—or rather a reaction against it is implicit—in Abraham's grandson's somewhat resentful proclamation: "He was known all over this country—not only because of his stories either."⁷

The oldest testimony on the nature of Abe Smith's tale-telling reputation in Bloomington, an account published in 1889, shows inferentially a realization of the existence of that same moral snobbery: a folktale is a falsehood. It contains a folk explanation of Abe's genesis as a tale-teller, which is ingenious but which is disproved by the fact that Abe was a tale-teller before he went to Oregon: witness the 1879 account of his tale-telling, based on Smith's residence in Illinois prior to his Oregon expedition.

Several adventures . . . gave him material for several little romances, and when he returned to his former home [really his wife's former home], he took delight in telling them to the loafers in the stores about town. He did not

⁵ Dr. O. R. Scott, Chrisman, Illinois.

⁶ [W. H. Perrin, H. H. Hill, and A. A. Graham], *The History of Edgar County, Illinois* (Chicago: LeBaron, 1879), p. 447.

⁷ Mr. Milligan Smith, Chrisman, Illinois.

expect them to be believed, but he did want his ability as a story-teller to be appreciated. His auditors . . . either sneered or laughed. . . . [Abraham], discouraged, moved into greater and more baseless exaggeration. . . . They were at liberty to disbelieve them: he expected nothing else.⁸

Many other informants of a more modern period made statements that reveal they were confiding that Abe was not really a liar, he was not really trying to deceive one maliciously.

Old Abe never expected anyone to believe those stories. No, he just told stories to entertain them.⁹

An extension of the explanation that Smith's tales began with truths which were not believed is offered by another Bloomington source.

. . . . Mr. Smith attained the reputation of being a tremendous liar by telling stories that were essentially factual. . . . Circling the public square, repeating his tales of the wonders of Oregon, this Mr. Smith in a week . . . was labeled "Oregon" Smith.

Then the phrase was coined: "You're a bigger liar than Oregon Smith."¹⁰

Let me reiterate, logical and popular as this explanation of the genesis of Abe's whoppers is, it is destroyed by the fact that Abe was a renowned tale-teller before he went to Oregon. If the explanation just quoted is combined with that in the 1889 account by Hooper, an amazing parallel is formed to the following statement about Jim Bridger who is supposed to have invented tales after his true accounts of the marvels of the West were not believed.

⁸ C. Lauron Hooper, *A Cloverdale Skeleton*, p. 27.

⁹ Mr. Frank McCuddy and Mr. John M. Wasson, both of Chrisman, Illinois.

¹⁰ B. W. Bradfute, "Old Bloomington," *The World Telephone* (Bloomington, Indiana), November 23, 1944, p. 5.

Disgusted at his unmerited treatment and angered at the talk about "old Jim Bridger's lies," he retaliated, as so many other old mountain men have done, by stuffing his "tenderfoot" listeners with the most preposterous stories his imagination could conjure up.¹¹

Frequently, of course, there is, particularly now, the realization that Abe's story-telling was an art. Surely that same realization among his contemporaries gave permanence to his reputation. Though certainly loafers, as one of his contemporaries labeled them, made up a large part of his audience, there were others who heard him, too. In fact it would seem that there were few men indeed, who didn't enjoy listening to him. It was taboo, of course, for women to join his audience when he was "up in town" or in one of the spots where, to use the uniformly acceptable phrase of the Illinois farm village, the men "did their loafing." Even today a man does his loafing just as regularly and as systematically as he does his shopping or his chores. I was told to wait in a harness shop for one informant: "He does his loafing here every afternoon between two and three." I sat in a gasoline station where, among others, a bank president came to do his loafing at about 10:45 six mornings a week. I asked a clothier whether keeping a circle of chairs around a heater in the middle of a very modern and expensive haberdashery was not inconvenient. "I wouldn't dare take them out: we'd lose a lot of business if we got high-hat." Such are the circumstances to-day, and the audience is still usually male. In Abraham's day the audience was even more exclusively male. Of course, women knew his stories either from their menfolk or, if they were members of his family, from Abe as he told them in his house or theirs.

From such a group, contemporary with Smith or modern, come mixed reactions, as has been already pointed out. One woman, whose life overlapped that of Abe in Bloomington, but who was kept by her sex and by her parents' disapproval of Abe from hearing the tales from the master himself, nevertheless wrote from her second-hand knowledge of his

¹¹ William S. Brackett, "Bonneville and Bridger," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, III (1900), 183.

art: "He was another Baron Munchausen."¹² A doctor, who himself told tales excellently, remarked,

Abe was always telling big lies. That was his art. These days he'd belong to a Liars' Club. But then his church couldn't see further than that they were lies. He was a good man, but—as the church people said—he had a weakness for lying.¹³

The doctor shows both an understanding of the position and skill of a tale-teller and a realization of one kind of relatively unintelligent strait-laced reaction that such an artist faced.

Whether the skill was thought of as immoral or not, there seems to have been general recognition that Abe Smith was the greatest master of the skill in whatever region he might find himself. That he was, and even is, the criterion for proficiency in this art is very evident.

Students and the people here used to say, "That's an Old Oregon Smith tale." He had an imagination. Maybe someone would tell a story. Someone else would always refer to Oregon Smith.¹⁴

Once it was very common in Bloomington, Indiana, to say, "You lie like Oregon Smith." In parts of Edgar County it is still common to say, "You're like Lying Abe Smith," or "Be careful, Abe," or "Now, Abe." All these recognitions of merit and admonitions are perhaps the best proof of the extensive reputation of Abraham Smith, the tale-teller.

"By God, you're as bad as Abe Smith." That's what they say around here when someone gets off a big windy.¹⁵

Not only is "Be careful, Abe," used as a joking admonition to observe the truth among the folk of Edgar County; it is

¹² Miss Elizabeth Sluss, formerly of Bloomington, Indiana.

¹³ Dr. Rodney Smith, Bloomington.

¹⁴ Mrs. Lillian S. Reed, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹⁵ Mr. C. R. Jamison, Chrisman, Illinois.

a proverbial warning among the members of the Smith family wherever they may be.

You see where the Smiths get their gas from—it comes from way back. Really though he was the nicest old fellow.¹⁶

So remarked a smiling member of the family, in telling about the use of "Be careful, Abe." A similar development has taken place in the home town of Roy Bean, the Law West of the Pecos, whose fabrications were not so much a literary art as a practical means of lining his pockets. According to tradition Bean would suddenly develop an aching back whenever he was ahead in a poker game and did not wish to strain his luck too far.

It became proverbial around Langtry to say, when somebody was trying to get out of something, "There goes your goddam back again."¹⁷

A different sort of proof of the strength of Abe's reputation as a tale-teller — one from which we may also infer the social onus upon the story-teller — is the repeated assurance the Abe was honest, that he was religious, that he could be trusted, and so on. The implication is, of course, that such traits are not to be expected in a man who tells tales, particularly if he tells them well or makes a performance of it. The same assurances are made about many other real tale-tellers. There are no such assurances about Roy Bean, who was not a believer in the art for the art's sake alone. But of John Darling, New York state counterpart of Abe Smith, we are told:

Though he was forever telling lying tales, he never told an untruth in all the days of his life. He was a strictly religious man, never drank nor smoked. . . .¹⁸

¹⁶ Mr. Milligan Smith.

¹⁷ Charles Leland Sonnichsen, *Roy Bean, Law West of the Pecos* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1944), p. 146.

¹⁸ Moritz Jagendorf, "Catskill Darling: Facts about a Folk Hero," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, I (May, 1945), 76.

And of Jim Bridger,

The testimony of scores . . . can be produced showing that James Bridger was always to be trusted and believed in. . . . His idle tales were told only to idle people in idle hours.¹⁹

And of Gib Morgan, the oilmen's equivalent of Abe Smith,

Although noted for "stretching the long bow" on occasions when he knew he would not be taken seriously, his word in business matters or between friends was held inviolate.²⁰

But it must not be thought that everyone shared the opinions that Abe's story-telling was a talented performance or that his fabrications were peccadillos to be excused, to be pardoned in an otherwise worthy man. No, indeed. Many considered the stories as harmful, purposeless lies and Abe as an immoral person for telling them. A good illustration, particularly around Bloomington where the memory of the man has almost entirely faded and nothing remains but frayed recollection of a story-teller, is found in the collector's experiences with all informants named Smith. Every one was quick to assert that Oregon Smith was no relation of his. That a modification of the same attitude exists in Edgar County is clear:

He was no fool. Why the world produces people who'll tell stories like that like they were the truth, I don't know. He was reprimanded often enough, goodness knows. . . .²¹

During Abe's own life at least one member of his family was ashamed of his story-telling, as is clear in the evidence given during a law suit between Abraham and his daughter Deborah.

¹⁹ J. Cecil Alter, *James Bridger: Trapper, Frontiersman, Scout and Guide* (Salt Lake City: Shepard Book Co., c1925), p. 395.

²⁰ Mody C. Boatright, *Gib Morgan: Minstrel of the Oil Fields* (Austin, Texas: Texas Folklore Society, 1945), p. 36, quoting a newspaper, the *Oil City Derrick*.

²¹ Mr. Albert W. Wilkin, Vermilion, Illinois.

It should be clear in the material used earlier in this article that Jim Bridger suffered much the same lot from people who confused the art of story-telling with lying. It happened elsewhere, also:

John Darling — he was the damndest liar. I don't mind settin' down if the other man knows it's a lie and you know it's a lie, but he'd swear it was true and you'd know it couldn't be so.²²

In Bloomington, where the unfavorable moral judgment is particularly strong, because of the difference between the chronological forces playing on the formation of the Smith legend there and those forces in action in Illinois, the conviction that Abe was a liar has led to unwillingness to believe any thing about Smith — even in some instances, to a disbelief in his very existence! — or to misinterpretation and depreciation of his career:

In the 1870's this Mr. Smith took a trip across the continent to far away Oregon. He traveled about Oregon for several months and returned to Bloomington with the fixed opinion that Oregon was the American version of the Garden of Eden.²³

And one informant, one who had known Smith during most of the twenty years he resided in Bloomington, snorted derisively, "Nah, he was never to Oregon. Just around here."²⁴ Naturally, there are believers as well as non-believers:

Oh, yes, he was in Oregon, he was there. That's where he came from.²⁵

I don't know for sure, but I think he must have been in Oregon. Oh, he must have been; otherwise they wouldn't have called him Oregon.²⁶

²² Herbert Halpert, "John Darling, A New York Munchausen," *Journal of American Folklore*, LVII (April, 1944), 98.

²³ B. W. Bradfute, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Actually Smith spent a decade in Oregon, and some of his family remained there.

²⁴ Mr. Fred Hoover.

²⁵ Mrs. Lillian S. Reed.

In general the reputation that Abraham accumulated as the teller of tales caused the submergence of other memories of him in the folk at large and, particularly in Bloomington but somewhat in Illinois, the genesis of a tradition that he was a loafer and an inventor of worthless fancies. Where his family still survives, naturally the substitute tradition has not enjoyed so healthy a growth. Forgotten everywhere except by the few still living who actually knew him, are the facts that he was, though a plunger, at times a successful farmer, that he was one of the early pioneers, that he was a very early "doctor," that he was in short the epitome of the romantic picture of the frontiersman — a tough fighter, a restless homesteader, and a story-teller — as well as a rather strangely individualistic person with his own religious and legalistic crotchets.

The deterioration which Abraham Smith's full reputation suffered because of his reputation as a story-teller is somewhat paralleled by what recent research asserts happened to the reputation of Abraham Lincoln's father Thomas. Legend, it seems, has turned a career of honesty, reliability, faithful churchmanship, into a career of absolute worthlessness, and that only perhaps because Thomas Lincoln was an excellent raconteur.²⁷

Perhaps the best way to end the discussion of Abraham Smith's reputation as a story-teller is to give a version of that reputation as it seemed to a boy in his early teens, a boy who was much later to succeed to Abe's mantle as the story-teller of Edgar County.

I knew Abraham Smith up until I was twelve or fourteen years old. I would have paid more attention to him at that time, but he was past ninety then and I just supposed he would be here always. In fact I just looked at him at that time as a permanent fixture. I lived about three miles north of Chrisman, and when I came to town I put in

²⁶ Mr. Will I. Fee.

²⁷ Montgomery S. Lewis, *Legends that Libel Lincoln* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1946), pp. 36-84, *passim*, particularly pp. 42 and 71.

my time following Abe around to hear another one of his stories in case he released one. . . . I always liked to hear tall stories and I don't think I ever forgot any of them that Abe put out.²⁸

Along with the folk evidence upon Abe Smith's reputation as a tale-teller and the effects of that reputation, there is a fair amount of evidence upon the actual performance of Abe Smith. This material shows how a master tale-teller went about his art.

In discussing John Darling, Herbert Halpert writes:

We should also note John Darling's readiness to match stories, a feature, as far as I have been able to determine, that characterizes most of the yarn-spinning sessions in this country. John Darling is only a superlative member of a widespread guild.²⁹

Although I agree that the lying contest is a common thing, Abe Smith was not characteristic. Of course he listened to jokes and he may have swapped jokes. But he did not swap lies. Many tellers regard their tale-telling as lie-swapping or joke-telling. Not so Abe Smith, and his audiences did not think of him as a tale-swapper. They came to listen. They asked him to tell a story. They "tried to get him to tell a story." If either Abe or his auditors evolved a philosophy of composition based on his tale-telling, it was that his was a narrative performance as distinct from the tale- and joke-swapping of others.

Abe had favorite places to do his loafing. The last two were grocery stores, and there he held court. People came to hear him tell stories. There is never any recollection of his swapping tales. One tale is told about a kind of tale-swapping or liars' contest, and the point of it seems to be that Abe was too proficient for the very best liar in a lying contest. But it didn't matter where Abe was. If he was spotted coming across a field, the workers would stop and ask him for a story. Many accounts tell of his being the center of a street-corner

²⁸ Guy Scott, in a letter dated February 24, 1947.

²⁹ "John Darling: A New York Munchausen," p. 99.

crowd. One mentions the crowd awaiting the beginning of a political rally gathering around Abe in hopes of hearing him perform. Almost any setting and any audience would do, but the common backdrops for his performances were the loafing places and the sidewalks with the concomitant audiences. He didn't have to tell stories; evidently just listening to his speech and repartee, clever and colorful, was enough to satisfy.

A description of this process, not altogether enthusiastic or complimentary, is called up from the experience of another boy, nearly sixty years after the fact.

When I was a kid, eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, something like that, old Ike Scott had a store in Chrisman. There were two doors to it that made a kind of entrance. Old Abe Smith sat to one side of that entrance watching people. He had false teeth, I remember, and they were kind of loose and gave him some trouble. Even so, he wanted to talk, to anyone who would stop and listen. To someone coming in from the country, like I did, anything was interesting. So I made it a point to stop every time I was by and listen to Old Mr. Smith.

It was not very far along before he'd start talking about his remedy, this here sassafras oil. He wore a frock coat with tails behind and pockets in those tails. Soon as he got going, he'd reach back this way and pull out a little bottle. And he'd tell all about what that would cure. I listened to that a good many times, and all the time he was having trouble with those false teeth.³⁰

Mody C. Boatright quotes one Dr. W. M. Kennedy on Gib Morgan and the proper identification of his techniques.

They used to say that he was "the biggest liar in the oil country." But I don't think this is the proper title for him. I would say that the "best entertainer in the oil country" would have been a much better title.³¹

With substitution of some phrase for "the oil country" the same could be said of Abraham Smith. Abe certainly was

³⁰ Mr. Purl Scott, Chrisman, Illinois.

³¹ *Gib Morgan: Minstrel of the Oil Fields*, p. 36.

an entertainer in the wide sense of the word. He told his stories with care and for the benefit of an audience. One of his first considerations was to make the tone serious, to sound as though he was telling the truth.

Old Mr. Smith would tell his tales just for fun. I don't suppose he believed them or he meant us to believe them, but you couldn't tell any different from the way he told them.³²

The straight face with which Abe told his stories called for consummate acting and was a part of his technique for at least forty years. The one description of his tales and technique which can be based only on his life in Illinois prior to his trip to Oregon in the 1850's, says:

Mr. Blanchard [a neighbor of Abe in the 1830's and 1840's] has heard them [Abe's tales] so often that he verily believes that Smith having repeated them so many times, actually thought them true.³³

Besides reflecting Abe's technique, Mr. Blanchard's convictions probably indicate that Abe's repertoire was not unlimited but was very well rehearsed. He did not contradict himself. He told relatively few stories, but he retold them frequently — and people were willing to listen to those frequent repetitions, a very great compliment to the artist's skill, to the entertainer, if one will.

The longest and most careful analysis of Abe as a storyteller came from Mr. Albert W. Wilkin of Vermilion, Illinois. Although not willingly a "liar" himself — for reasons of moral judgment that will be evident in the statement — Mr. Wilkin is an extremely capable narrator. Blessed with a good memory, he remembers Abe, his stories, and his technique clearly. His family has known Abe's family for a long time, and his father was Abe's guardian for a short time. His statement and those of Purl and Guy Scott and J. W. Ellsberry I consider the most knowing in the appraisal of Abe's tale-telling techniques. Mr. Wilkin's statement follows and is given

³² Otis Matheny.

³³ [Perrin, Hill and Graham], *The History of Edgar County*, p. 441.

in full in so far as it referred to Abe's story-telling talents: the only omissions are specific tales.

I never heard him tell a smutty story. He never cracked a smile when he told his tales, *and* he didn't want you to smile either. . . . He was no fool. Why the world produces people who'll tell stories like that like they were the truth, I don't know. He was reprimanded often enough, goodness knows. . . . There are people today the type he was. It comes from childhood. A boy will start telling the awfulest tales. We had a boy used to come in our store like that. He would tell the most plausible lies — but they were plausible and entertaining. It takes a kind of imagination and genius, I suppose. Old Abraham Smith was that type.

They were always his own stories, about himself. He would tell what he had done, not what he had seen or anything like that. He was always in his own stories. . . . I heard him tell every one he knew [notice again the implications of limited and well rehearsed repertoire]. Us kids would listen to him by the hour. But it made him mad [was this not acting?] when we would laugh. He'd say, almost fierce, "What's so funny about that, son?" I heard them many times. . . .

I heard him tell that spider and blue-bottle fly story [from *A Cloverdale Skeleton*—Mr. Wilkin was the only informant who had ever heard of the book.] All the stories in that book are true [*i.e.*, were told by Smith] except the breaking of his lying. No, I don't recollect any ghost stories or stories about dwarfs. . . .

His hands were always going when he was telling his stories. His voice didn't sound like anybody else's. It was a deep old man's voice — clear for his age and carrying. I can still hear him [imitation of tone]: "I'll pay you well."

He was relatively well educated. Above average intelligence, too intelligent to tell such stories. Compare him to Abe Lincoln. Abe Lincoln told stories too, but they were to illustrate something, not to brag about himself, not to make himself a hero. . . .

Not to his face was he called "Lying Abe." He was too much respected. You wouldn't call him that. Might be that he was referred to as Lying Abe to contrast him from